Note by LMB: This e-mail interview was done by Baen editor Jim Minz for the Baen site in August of 2007. It appeared in an edited form here: http://www.baen.com/Interviews/intBujold.htm

Bujold-Minz interview for Baen 8-22-07

Lois McMaster Bujold has written over twenty novels and numerous short stories, many of which have been set in her multiple award-winning Vorkosigan Saga, which not only sets the gold standard for space opera, but also garnered her four Hugo and two Nebula Awards, as well as many other awards and nominations. And to think, it all began with *The Warrior's Apprentice* being unearthed in the slush pile and bought, along with two other novels, by the late, great Jim Baen, back in 1985…

JM: Can you talk a bit about when Jim Baen first reached out to you about wanting to publish your novels?

LMB: This would have been 1985. I had at that point finished *Shards of Honor*, finished *The Warrior's Apprentice*, re-edited *Shards* (still titled *Mirrors* at that stage) and was at work on *Ethan of Athos*. *WA* had been rejected by Tor and Ace; on the advice of the Ace editor, who said it was a YA (Young Adult, what used to be called "Juvenile Fiction" back in my day–think early Heinlein), probably because the protagonist was 17, I sent it to YA publisher Atheneum, who plainly disagreed; the manuscript came back in about eight weeks. (There was another rejection in there somewhere from Bantam, but I can't at this distance remember which of the two first books it was for.) A portion and outline of *Ethan* was sitting with Terry Carr, in hopes of making it to the top of his twelve-foot-high slush pile for a line he was then editing specifically for first novels.

Upon *WA* returning from long-shot Atheneum (somewhat to my relief as well as disappointment–I didn't see it, or my other work, as that likely for YA), I asked my writing friends and mentors "What next?" I was running out of options, I thought. Lillian Stewart Carl then suggested I send it to Baen, a company I'd not heard of (Baen Books was at this point barely two years old) because she'd had a nice chat with then-senior-editor Betsy Mitchell in a line at a Worldcon, and thought Betsy might give, at the least, a more informative letter of rejection than I had received heretofore. So I packed it up and sent it off, together with a cover letter mentioning the other two books. I have a dim memory, or feeling I ought to have a memory, of some mid-stream communication with Betsy at some point about the other two volumes.

Anyway, the next thing that happened, in late October of 1985, was Jim Baen calling me on the phone, there in my kitchen in Marion, Ohio, and offering to buy all three volumes. I was completely flummoxed by the acceptance being a phone call; I would at the time have assumed any word would travel by mail. I have since learned that good news tends to go by phone, bad news by letter, for rather obvious psychological reasons on the parts of editors and agents. (Or so it was till the advent of e-mail.)

Which, besides confusing me–who ***was*** this guy on my phone? I knew roughly what editors did, but had no idea what function publishers had–thrilling me and making me hyperventilate, threw me into a tizzy of confusion about the scary business of contracts, because I didn't have an agent. (At this stage I didn't even know that publishing companies hired out their printing, instead of doing it themselves, let alone what tasks each job-name went with.) I also harbored a lot of semi-informed paranoia about publishers and publishing very typical of a first-novelist, and had no business experience. But I had some reassuring phone conversations with a couple of other writers about contracts and being one's own agent, formally withdrew the other books from Terry Carr (I also had to check with friends on the etiquette for this) took a deep breath, and went for it.

As it happened I was a better writer than literary agent, but in the long run it worked out well for me, because when I finally did get an agent, seven books later, I got one of the best in the business, Eleanor Wood, who has been very much more compatible for me over the long haul than any first blind pick would have been. And she was, over time, able to correct all the stupid things I did in those early contracts, too. But all in all, it felt so much like fairy gold, liable to evaporate at any time, that it was several weeks before I announced the sale to the rest of my family, only after the contracts had arrived, been signed, and sent back. Thanksgiving dinner at my parents, a brother and his family visiting, although I wasn't quite able to spring it with dessert as I envisioned–"Ah ha! *Now* do you see why I've been doing all this for the past three years?"–because my daughter let the cat out of the bag early. But it was good enough. My family were perhaps more amazed than was quite flattering, but that's families for you.

I will say this for Jim: he was very, very patient over the years, then and afterward, with educating me, or trying to, about the realities of publishing. I was especially skittish because so much seemed to be riding on this last grasp at success, out of a life I had by my early thirties run, through a number of bad choices and false starts, into a very uncomfortable hole. All better now.

Which leads me to wonder, actually, how it all looked from the other end of the phone line and correspondence back then. When I

was picturing all these, in some cases, extremely imaginative things about my publisher, what were they picturing about their writer? That would be an interesting question to ask.

Much later, I got a peek at the reader's report on *The Warrior's Apprentice* that the slush reader wrote up for Betsy. (Publishers, then and now, hire lesser beings to triage the slush, bounce the obviously sub-literate or impossible items back to their writers, and send on the pick of the litter to the actual editors, who *still* have too much to read.) This first reader was clearly a bit flummoxed, not to mention embarrassed, by having been sucked in by something so low-brow and genre-obsolete as a space opera (the hot new thing just then was cyberpunk), but, but, but...

JM: What stories and bits of wisdom can you share about the parallel evolutions of your writing career, Baen Books, and your family, which all sort of grew up together?

LMB: I viewed publishing generally in the '80s through a blur of distance and ignorance, mostly, only very gradually brought into more accurate focus by contact with real editors, agents, and other pros at conventions. (Remember, the internet didn't exist then.) I had started writing in late 1982, when my daughter was four and my son one, so I was producing all this early work out of a household with two pre-school children. Fred Pohl once remarked; "The good news about writing as a career is that the income curve is asymptotic. The bad news is that it starts at zero." It wasn't till the early '90s that I started making enough money to actually live on and support my family, as the books accumulated, advances earned out and inched up, and I started to make my first few sub-rights sales. And, of course, having both kids in school gave me somewhat better control over my own writing time. So everything eased in the '90s, but I was still running hard, in terror of falling back into the hole.

Baen Books' evolution took place mostly off-stage, from my point of view. A writer only deals directly with their publisher a few times a year, when a new submission is made or contract is ironed out, when royalty reports arrive and are perused with the intent interest old Romans used to give to the entrails of sacrifices, or when a book is turned in and goes through the editorial process, which with Jim, Betsy and soon Toni I always found pretty non-invasive. Again, this is something that the internet and e-mail has changed; I have much more voluminous and frequent contact and communication with my publisher/s these days than I did back then.

I do fancy, rightly or wrongly I don't know, that Baen's interest in cultivating its website and, later, e-books, was given a turbo-boost

by the great success we had doling out free samples of *A Civil Campaign*, back in the late '90s. So I have slightly godmotherish feelings toward Baen.com, even though it was others who did all the work of actually making it happen.

JM: In your preface for *Miles, Mutants and Microbes* (which can be read in its entirety here: http://www.webscription.net/chapters/1416521410/1416521410.htm?blurb) you mention how these three tales are linked by Quaddiespace, and why they were chosen to be collected in one volume. You also say that when you came finally came back to Quaddiespace, with *Diplomatic Immunity,* it "was much better than I'd ever expected, more complex and subtler." What makes it better, more complex and subtler? How did the fourteen-year gap between writing the stories affect the tale?

LMB: The worldbuilding of Quaddie culture, mostly. I don't now know how I would have developed it back then, if I'd followed up on my initial idea, back before I'd even written *Falling Free,* of a tale about Arde Mayhew looking for a replacement ship. He was supposed to run across an RG ship somewhere out there in a poor system that lacked a planet and got by as junk-dealing asteroid dwellers. Quaddiespace wouldn't even have been Quaddiespace, just a fairly standard asteroid belt culture out of a 1960's *Analog* story, probably. Or at least, that would have been its jumping-off point, creatively. By the time I wrote *Diplomatic Immunity* I'd had more time to learn and think about how people and their cultures create each other, developing settings like Barrayar and others in the saga. And, of course, the notion of Miles's world as a bioengineered future had slotted in and become firmer, though it was actually the writing of *Falling Free* itself, back in 1986, that did that.

I will say, at no time past age 12 have I ever believed in the idea of a wild west in space. Any culture critically dependent for people's lives on complicated technology needs to be more controlled and rule-abiding, not less. The enforcement need not be top-down; one's neighbors, having a direct vested interest in stupid behavior or careless accidents not killing them, will do the job.

I also don't know how Quaddiespace would have developed if it had come at the tail of a trilogy, as originally briefly envisioned. Much about it was inherent in the original set-up from *Falling Free*, after all, and might have converged similarly in the end. OK, well, it likely would have been more complex, or at least more detailed, with a couple of other volumes in which to develop, yeah. Quantity has a quality all its own and all that. Or it might have suffered some

unexpected left turn. If anyone ever acquires a library card for Dream's library, they can report back how the unwritten books went.

JM: Your preface also mentions the difficulty in coming up with a title for this omnibus, "which proved almost the hardest part of all. (I would say, "But you should see the ones we discarded!" except that I don't think anyone ever should. Ever, ever.)" How about fessing up to just one? What one title suggestion caused the biggest groan and/or laugh? (If you really don't want to answer this, that's totally fine.)

LMB: My first idea was *Miles & Metallurgy*, but no one liked that. There followed a lot of really bad puns on the order of groaners like, *Vorwarned is Four-Armed*, which no one took seriously. I hope. I tried to get my chat list to work on the problem, but they didn't have any better luck. The eventual winner was Baen minion Hank Davis's suggestion. I think it's a bit close to *Miles, Mystery & Mayhem*, and I'm afraid people are likely to get them mixed up, but really, I didn't have a better idea. By this point in the omnibus series (*Young Miles, Miles, Mystery & Mayhem, Miles Errant*), we seemed to be committed to something with "Miles" in the title, and alliteration tends to follow. Hence also *Miles in Love*, upcoming.

I'm still regretful about leaving the pivotal book *Memory* out of the omnibus sequence, but as I explain in the preface mentioned above, the grouping-and-division problem toward the end of the series was maddeningly impossible to solve satisfactorily. I'd have had to write a prequel and stick it in somewhere to make it all come out even, and there wasn't room. Or desire. I'm more interested in moving forward.

JM: Beyond next February's publication of *Miles in Love* (omnibus comprising *Komarr*, "Winterfair Gifts" and *A Civil Campaign*), what lies ahead for Miles and the rest of the Vorkosiverse?

LMB: As of this interview, I officially don't know yet. I still have the last few complicated chapters of the fourth volume of *The Sharing Knife* fantasy series to get out of my head before there will be room for anything new. Miles, you may be sure, takes up all available neurons and psychic energy to write. I am also overdue for a break, and some time spent in the sort of random cultural filter-feeding, everything from reading other books to watching DVDs to travel (it's been years since I traveled anywhere that wasn't on business) that ultimately fuels the creativity. By next spring, I should have it sorted.

With luck, it might be something ornery. My best books all seem to have come out of my more ornery, "Ha? Izzat so? I'll show them!" moments as a writer.

JM: How did your love affair with SF begin?

LMB: Young, as is typical but not universal among fans, I find. Besides starting about age nine reading magazines and paperback anthologies that my dad picked up on airplane trips, I had access to whatever was sloshing around school and my local public libraries in the early '60s. Two very early encounters that had me circling back for more were, in grade school, *The Visit to the Mushroom Planet* by Eleanor Cameron, and, a bit later, Eric Frank Russell's *Men, Martians and Machines*. The SF genre was the first place I encountered grown-up fiction that had humor and a positive outlook.

JM: Who have been major influences for you as an author, and why/how?

LMB: Oh, lordy, so many. Poul Anderson, Cordwainer Smith, Randall Garrett, Georgette Heyer, Dorothy Sayers, to artificially limit it to five. Anderson for his character-driven space opera, Cordwainer Smith for his bioengineered future, Garrett for the delight of his fertile literary recombinations, Heyer for romance and social comedy, Sayers for classy mystery, all of which pop up in my own works from time to time. Tolkien is intermittently huge for me as a reader, but as a writer his influence is more indirect, as I find myself responding to his work in more oblique ways.

I've defined genre as "any group of works in close conversation with one another", and just what a particular book of mine is conversing, or in some cases arguing, with varies from volume to volume.

JM: If you were going to cast the story as a movie or miniseries (either all of *Miles, Mutants & Microbes*, or just one of the three individual stories in the omnibus—your choice), who would you like to see in the major roles? (And remember, thanks to cgi, don't worry as much about physical limitations—if Hollywood can make believable hobbits, they could make believable quaddies…at least we can hope.)

LMB: Alas, I don't follow current actors closely enough to have a pick, although the casting game is a favorite among my fans.

JM: What major innovation and/or technological advance would you like to see in your lifetime?

LMB: Immortality would be a good one. Then I could wait for the rest.
Some actuary once figured that if physical immortality were cracked, the average person would still only live about 800 years before being caught in some fatal accident, which I find pretty believable for an internet statistic. But if we had more time, would we just waste more time? Modern life seems to suggest it.

JM: If you could travel back in time and space, where and when would you go, and why?

LMB: You know, oddly enough I don't especially want to go back in time; I'd like to know more about the past, but I don't want to live there. Even the chance of correcting the mistakes of my own youth chances (guarantees, actually) that I might end up someplace other than here, and I rather like here.

JM: When's the last time you had a chance to gaze at the moons of Jupiter?

Okay, this last one isn't a real question, just a thinly veiled trip down memory lane. I still fondly remember standing in the observatory out in that county park near Eau Claire, surrounded by a bunch of SF academics, none of whom showed the least bit of interest in taking a second look through the telescope. Even as the discussion with the astronomer went on and on, you and I kept taking turns looking at Jupiter, every once in a while taking a moment to pause and look up, like some kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar, thinking someone would step in and take another turn. And when no one did, we'd just help ourselves to another cookie. It was quite a while ago, but I still remember it vividly. I mean, Hale-Bopp was okay, but electronically filtered images just aren't the same as the naked eye using optics. It was the biggest telescope I'd ever had a chance to use for stargazing...

LMB: Heh. I'd almost forgotten that outing. Much as you say, though I also remember being especially impressed with the outdoors-ness of the rural Wisconsin venue, big pine trees in the cool, damp night air, wonderful old wooden buildings of that knotty-pine era of vacation-

place construction. And, of course the rural silence, which I miss here in my current urban home, much as I love the other amenities.

JM: Oh, and P.S., one of the absolute best parts about joining Baen is knowing that I finally have the excuse to read the rest of the Vorkosigan novels (once you're in the business, it gets awfully tough to find the time to read everything, but now, I well, I just ***have*** to fill in the gaps in my reading.). And that I'll get an early look at the new novel. (Woohoo!)

* Eventually, eventually... :-)